

FINE ARTS FOR THE BLIND

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

"This must be the first Braille," was the remark of a high school boy from the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind as he explored with his fingers the inside of an Egyptian tomb at the Metropolitan Museum



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BY JOHN D. MORSE

THEY CAME HALTINGLY up the steps of the Fifth Avenue entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art — twenty high school students from the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind led by a boy who gave me a jolt before they were even inside the door.

"I'm what they call 'partially sighted'," he explained bitterly in a harsh, adolescent voice. "I can tell black from white."

Desperately, I recalled their teacher's advice: "Treat them just like other children. That's what they want above all."

All right. The old routine.

"First of all, I'd like to know how many of you have ever been here before."

They quieted at once while a couple of hands were raised.

"Then one or two of you know what to expect. But for those of you who *haven't* been here before I'd like to point out that this building is very much like a library. Except that instead of the books that people have written about themselves we have here the things they actually made with their hands. And we'll see in a minute how these things can tell us as much about their makers as the books they have written. I hear you've been reading about Egypt. What can you tell me about the Egyptians? What kind of people were they?"

The usual puzzled silence.

"Well, were they a very religious people?"

A chorus of eager "Yes's."

"Do you think they were more interested in having a good time while they were alive, or in what would happen to their souls after they died?"

"They were more interested in their souls after they died."

So far so good. I had almost forgotten that this assignment had cost me several sleepless nights the week before.

"Then if the Egyptians were more interested in their souls than their bodies, so to speak, what do you think their sculpture is going to look like . . . and feel like? Or let me ask it this way. If an Egyptian had a wart on his nose, and a sculptor was making a stone figure of him to put in his tomb, do you think he'd include the wart?"

A chorus of shrill laughs and "no's."

"Why wouldn't he include the wart?"

"Because . . . because it just wouldn't fit in."

"Exactly! When you're thinking about a man's soul, or his spirit, or whatever you want to call it, you just don't see such an insignificant thing as a wart on his nose. You're thinking about something deep inside him, something you can't see, and so you're apt to overlook such things as the wrinkles in his skin or how one ear is slightly bigger than the other. But pretty soon we're going to look at some sculptures made by another ancient people. These people weren't so much interested in what happened after they died as they were in having a good time while they were still alive. Any of you know who I mean?"

"Could it be the Romans?" one girl asked hopefully.

"Good for you. And what do you think most Roman sculpture is going to look like?"

A prompt chorus of, "It will have warts and wrinkles."

"Well, that's putting it a little strong, but you've got the idea. Now let's look at a few Egyptian sculptures. First we'll go inside this burial chamber of a tomb, and then we'll look at some stone figures that might have stood outside it. You'd

better line up again and move in single file so everybody will get a chance to feel the walls. They're made of sandstone and are covered with carved inscriptions and figures. To the right here as you go inside is a picture of the funeral procession of Sebk-Mose, a royal treasurer of Egypt who probably spent several centuries in this tomb before grave robbers broke into it. Here at the end is a picture of Sebk-Mose himself, offering sacrifices to the two gods of the underworld so they will let him into the Egyptian heaven. Know who those gods were?"

"Anubis and Osiris."

"Correct. And how did the Egyptians picture the god Anubis?"

"As a jackal."

"And what kind of an animal is a jackal?"

"It feels like a dog with big ears and a long sharp nose."

From then on we had a fine time. When one boy exclaimed, "This must be the first Braille," as his fingers explored the carved hieroglyphics of the tomb, all the strain of our relationship had disappeared. And when a girl rubbed her soiled hands together with the remark that apparently we didn't dust off the tops of the tall sculptures, I was able to say that I was learning as much from them as they were from me. Then I could point out the advantage they had over other museum visitors, who are never allowed to touch anything, even sculpture, which by its very nature *invites* feeling.

"One of the things a good sculptor keeps in mind is selecting a material that is suited to his subject. Sebk-Mose was just an official in the Egyptian court. His tomb was made of sandstone. Now feel this figure here and see what you can tell me about the man it represents."

"Oh! It's smooth and hard." "Is it marble?" "It's cool."

"It feels like an animal." "I know! *I know*, teacher! It's a

sphinx, with the body of a lion and the head of a man. So it must be a king."

"Perfect. It's made of diorite, a fine hard stone, and very suitable for the portrait of a king. Now do you think this idea of making a king with the body of a lion would appeal to the Romans?"

"No."

"Neither do I. The Romans as a rule were much too realistic and practical to think in terms of symbols. A lion was a lion, and a man was a man. But let's go and look at some Roman sculptures. I think you already know how different they are going to feel from these Egyptian ones."

They did know. "It's more life-like," said one girl, as she felt the remarkably realistic head of an old man. "All the wrinkles are in his face."

"Maybe he was just an old man," said one boy sagely. "All old people have wrinkles in their faces." So I took him to feel the head of a Roman youth, one without wrinkles but with all the details of eyes, ears, nose, mouth and hair marvelously executed in the realistic tradition of Roman portrait sculpture, as though in answer to the dictum of Cato the Censor that "Sound sense makes a man; the rest is rubbish."

"I see," he said, feeling the stone ear and comparing it with his own. "The Egyptians left out this little bump in the middle, but the Romans put it in." Then he grinned at me. "But maybe this Roman boy didn't have a soul."

By this time I was sure of the success of my final demonstration, but as I led them into a gallery of contemporary sculpture I wondered again if it would work. So many adults with both eyes and fingers have missed the point.

Black panther by the contemporary Spaniard, MATEO HERNANDEZ, pronounced Egyptian by the blind high school students as they felt its conventionalized forms and smooth, hard surfaces, with the texture of its hair left completely to imagination, its whiskers only suggested



"It's more life-like than the Egyptian," said one blind girl as she felt the portrait head of a Roman in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "All the wrinkles are here"



Very conveniently for my purpose, the Museum had confronted a life-size, sleek black panther of diorite by the Spanish contemporary, Mateo Hernandez, with a softer stone group of a tiger attacking an antelope by Antoine Barye, who worked in the realistic tradition of the 19th century. The two are emblematic of the gulf that separates the world of our grandfathers from our own — a confident, 19th century world ruled by scientific fact, and a skeptical, 20th century world ruled by human emotion. This is an obvious simplification of an involved and debatable idea, but without going into it further I wanted to know if these blind high school students would see any difference. I grouped them around the Barye tiger.

"Who do you think made this tiger?"

"Not an Egyptian," said one boy immediately as he felt the surface of the stone, roughened with a chisel to simulate the texture of hair.

"Who then?"

"A Roman made it," came the chorus.

"No, it was made by a man who lived about a hundred years ago in the 19th century, when most sculpture looked like this. What does it tell you about him and about the people of his time?"

"They were like the Romans. Realistic. Practical."

"All right, now feel this panther over. What kind of people do you think made it?"

"A religious, mystical people, like the Egyptians," came the unanimous response as their hands ran over its conventionalized forms and smooth, hard surfaces, its whiskers suggested by a few incised lines and the texture of its hair left completely to the imagination.

"Well, the panther was made about fifteen years ago, and is a fine example of the style of 20th century art. So what does it tell you about the kind of people we are today?"

"That we are more like the Egyptians than the Romans."

"I think so too, but it's a pretty complicated subject, and anyway our time is up, so I suggest you think about it on the way home and we can talk about it next time you come, which I hope you'll want to do."

"We sure will. Good-bye."

I am aware that teachers of the blind can select their material more easily and arbitrarily than other teachers, and so can more easily impose their notions without fear of annoying contradictions. Perhaps another guide, with other notions about the history of civilization, would have achieved different results. But whatever the results and conclusions, no one could deny the value of the experience. Deprived of the pleasure of color, these twenty blind children found the pleasure of texture and sculptural form, which other museum visitors must get second-hand, through their eyes. And denied the dubious privilege of reading the labels (which most of us too often substitute for looking at the objects), they were forced to concentrate all their attention on the works of art themselves.

I like to think that a whole new world of pleasurable knowledge has been opened to them. And I anticipate the day when our art museums will have rooms set aside filled with "touchable" things from every country and period, displayed in such a way that toes won't bump the pedestals, with pleasant-feeling ropes to invite blind visitors from one object to another, and with, I suppose, even labels in Braille.



JOSE DE CREEFT, *Maternity*, granite, about 1928. Winner of First Purchase Prize, \$5000, Artists For Victory competition, New York.

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